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ABSTRACT

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# College Women's Role Model Choice : A Developmental Analysis

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Paper presented at the Ninth Annual Midyear Conference of the American Educational Research Association Special Interest Group: Research on Women and Education, Tempe, Arizona, November 3-5, 1983.

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Abstract

The present study defined a role model as someone whom a woman conceptualizes and chooses. In contrast to previous research, the present investigation revealed that women's role model choices were more varied. Women predominantly named opposite-sex relatives, instructors, and professionals as their role models and models they would like to have in the future. In addition, role model choice varied as a function of age: more male models were named when women described themselves presently (college years) than when they were younger. Finally, women reported that gender is not an important characteristic of role models and that they could live without a role model of their same sex. However, many women reported that they would like to have a female role model, especially to help them in their professional vs. personal career decisions.

## Developmental Discontinuities in Women's Role Model Choice

A considerable amount of evaluation and controversy has been devoted to women's achievement. Research has generally indicated that women do not attain levels of success frequently attained by men (e.g., Astin, 1978; Vaughter, Ginorio, & Trilling, 1977). In addition, traditional measures of achievement motivation and achievement behavior have been unrelated for women (e.g., French & Lesser, 1964; McClelland, Atkinson, Clark, & Lowell, 1953; Veroff, Wilcox, & Atkinson, 1953). Furthermore, women rarely enter male-dominated occupations and college majors (e.g., Ekstrom, Note 1; Kutner & Brogan, 1976; Roby, 1973).

Several explanations have been offered to explain these common findings. Personality explanations include women's (1) need for achievement (Entwisle, 1972; Stein & Bailey, 1973); (2) fear of success (Horner, 1968; Hoffman, 1974); (3) self-attributions about the causes of success and failure (Deaux & Emswiller, 1974; Deaux, White & Farris, 1975); and (4) external locus of control (Marks, 1972). Data also suggests that institutional processes account for differences in men and women's achievement. For example, when men and women employed in the same occupation are compared, women still make a lower wage than men (Astin, 1978).

Women are also less likely to be accepted into post-graduate programs than men and are less likely to receive financial support for their education (Ekstrom, Note 1). Furthermore, aspiring and competent women perceive that they have fewer options available to them. They are more likely to focus on options outside of occupational and educational settings when making career decisions (e.g., age of children; availability of potential dating partners). As a result, their vocational aspirations appear to lack the continuity characteristic of men's achievement (Kutner & Brogan, 1976).

The importance of role models for women achieving career success has recently been receiving increased attention in the literature. Several theorists agree on the crucial role played by role models or mentors in promoting their protégés' professional development as well as personal growth (e.g., Douvan, 1976; Erikson, 1959; Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978). Levinson and his colleagues stated that mentors have a crucial function: "to support and facilitate the realization of the Dream" (p. 98), that is, the vision each young man has about the kind of life he wants as an adult. Levinson's research indicated that the most successful men had had mentors as young adults. He concluded that not having a mentor could be a serious handicap to an individual's career and psychological development: "poor mentoring in early adulthood is the equivalent of poor parenting in childhood" (p. 338).

Vaillant's (1977) longitudinal study of 95 male Harvard graduates supports Levinson, et. al.'s conclusion. Vaillant found that the men judged to be the "best outcomes" had been capable of "sustained relationships with loving people" (p. 337) in both their personal life and their career.

Finally, Burton suggested that "the total absence of a mentor in young adulthood is associated with an existential vacuum in clients and a neurotic search for meaning in life" (p. 117). Burton concluded that psychotherapy offers an opportunity for an individual to fulfill the mentee function, therefore allowing for normal adult development to occur.

Arguments in favor of female role models for women have emphasized the importance of women's identification with female models, the importance of the information provided by the model's behavior, and the positive incentive through illustrative success. Research has indicated, however, that women do not receive as much mentoring as do men. Explanations for this finding that have received much empirical support concern the scarcity of women who are in positions of serving as role models or mentors (e.g., Epstein, 1971; Fox, 1974; O'Leary, 1974; Sheehy, 1976; Tidball & Kistiakowsky, 1976); lack of female classmates (Taylor & McLaughlin, 1982); and the lack of informal networks (Taylor & McLaughlin, 1982). Women are being advised to find a mentor and to be one to other women (Merriam, 1983). Taylor and McLaughlin (1982) suggested that the professional woman (especially one in a male-dominated career) "has a particularly important mission because she

can influence future generations of professional women and can demonstrate to young women the possibility for working intellectual women to integrate work and achievement with feminine fulfillment" (p. 10).

Thus, the operation of role models or mentors on women's achievement in both academic settings and business has been receiving increased attention (e.g., Erkut & Mokros, 1981; Hepner & Faaborg, 1979; Kanter & Stein, 1979; Moore & Sangaria, 1979). Unfortunately, the answer to the question as to whether women need role models as do men in order to be successful has varied from study to study because of the researchers' conceptualization of role models. There has been little agreement to date as to how to define a role model. For example, Douvan (1976) stressed the importance of a role model defining possibilities of what an individual can accomplish. Basow and Howe (1980) suggested that a role model is "someone whose life and activities influenced the respondent in specific life decisions." Goldstein (1979) suggested that sustained, intense interaction with a role model is necessary, while Plost and Rosen (1974) concluded that mere visual exposure to an individual (e.g., via television) is sufficient for that person to serve as a role model. Furthermore, several investigators (e.g., Almquist & Angrist, 1971; Goldstein, 1979) have assumed women's role models are female: their mothers and/or teachers.

Instead of beginning with the premise that mothers and female teachers function as role models for women, the present study sought to ascertain who college women say their role models are. A second purpose of the present study was to identify desirable personality characteristics which might qualify someone to be a role model. Finally, the present study sought to determine developmental discontinuities in women's reports of their role models.

## Method

### Subjects

Three hundred seventy-seven women from introductory psychology classes participated in the present study. Women ranged in age from 17 to 34 years with a mean age of 20.4 years (S.D. = 1.94 years). Women received course credit for their participation in this study.

### Materials

Two questionnaires were devised for this study. One, (subsequently referred to as the "first questionnaire") adapted from Gaeddert, Kahn, Frevert, and Shirley (Note 2), consisted of the following questions to be answered in an open-ended fashion:

> During elementary school, who were the people (or person) you would most liked to have been like? That is, who were the people you tried to model yourself after? If there was no such person, write "no one."

During junior high, who were the people (or person) you would have most liked to have been like? That is, who were the people you tried to model yourself after? If there was no such person, write "no one."

During high school, who were the people (or person) you would have most liked to have been like? That is, who were the people you tried to model yourself after? If there was no such person, write "no one."

At the present time, who are the people (or person) you would like to be like? That is, who are the people you try to model yourself after? If there is no such person, write "no one."

A second questionnaire included the following items:

1. Describe 5 role models or mentors whom you have used in elaborating your identity -- for example, your mother, father, sister, brother, friend, movie star, etc. List 10 characteristics of each model that you like.

2. Who are some role models you might choose in the future? Explain your answer.

3. It is important to recognize when sex (male/female) is an important characteristic of our role models. Is whether the person is male or female an important characteristic of your role models? Explain your answer.

4. Could you live without a role model of your own sex? Explain your answer.

## Procedure

Women were administered both questionnaires in a mass testing arrangement. Approximately half of the women received the first questionnaire initially; the remaining half of the women initially responded to the second questionnaire. Both a male and female experimenter were present during the testing.

Categorizing Responses

Women's role model choices could be coded into 18 categories:

Female Relative (a specific female relative who was named, e.g., my mother; my aunt Esther)

Female Instructor (e.g., my second grade teacher, Mrs. St. Clair)

Female Celebrity (e.g., Jackie Onassis, Cheryl Tiegs)

Female in Field of Study Desired by Subject (e.g., my nursing supervisor)

Female Friend (e.g., my friend Sarah who lives in my dorm)

Male Relative (e.g., my father, my brother John)

Male Instructor (e.g., my high school English teacher, Mr. Vancourt)

Male Celebrity (e.g., John Wayne, Vincent Van Gogh)

Male in Field of Study Desired by Subject (e.g., my band director, Mr. Owens)

Male Friend (e.g., Richard, my chemistry lab partner)

Blank (i.e., item left unanswered by subject)

No one (i.e., subject indicated she had no role models)

Self (i.e., subject indicated she was her only role model

Vague Referent (e.g., Susie, Mrs. David -- no identification -- teacher, sister, model) was given

Religious Person Identified (e.g., my pastor, Reverend Michaels, Sister Phyllis -- the Mother Superior at my elementary school)

Religious Person Unidentified (e.g., nun, priest, rabbi)

Feminine Personality Characteristics (No person was named, but feminine personality traits were indicated (cf. Broverman, et. al., 1970; Spence & Helmreich, 1978, e.g., "I would like to be a warm and loving person.")

Masculine Personality Characteristics (e.g., "I want to be important and work on my own -- independent.")

If a woman listed more than one role model, each model was recorded. Since the statistical analyses of these data required independent observations, only the first role model listed by these women were used in the data analysis. The following categories were not sufficiently endorsed to be included in the analyses: No One, Self, Vague Referent, Blank, Male Celebrity, Female in Field of Study Desired by Subject, Religious Person Identified, Religious Person Unidentified. Each woman's responses were independently categorized by two of the authors.

## Results

For the chi-square tests of goodness of fit performed on the data from the questionnaire, age was defined as childhood (elementary school), early adolescence (junior high school), later adolescence (high school) and early adulthood (present time). Role model choice, was expressed as one of the 10 categories described earlier.

Table 1 presents the distribution of role model choices by age grouping. For the "childhood" age grouping, opposite-sex

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Insert Table 1 About Here

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relatives, instructors, professionals, personality characteristics, and friends were the most frequently chosen categories. Women overchose male role models and underchose female ones ($x^2$ = 71.81, $df$ = 9, $p < .001$). For the "early adolescence" age grouping, similar results were obtained ($x^2$ = 61.79, $df$ = 9, $p < .001$). Women also predominantly named opposite-sex role models when describing themselves in "later adolescence" ($x^2$ = 80.69, $df$ = 9, $p < .001$) and "early adulthood" ($x^2$ = 128.62, $df$ = 9, $p < .001$).

In addition, role model choice varied as a function of age: more male models were named when women described themselves in the high school and college years than when they were younger (elementary and junior high school).

Inspection of Table 1 also suggests age differences in the reporting of role models. Fewer women used the relatively unendorsed categories when describing themselves when older than when younger. Despite the nonsignificance, fewer women endorsed the "No One" category when responding to the college years than to the other three age groupings.

The role models women listed to the first item in the second questionnaire supported the results from the first: women predominantly named opposite-sex relatives, friends, and instructors as their role models.

Personality characteristics used to describe role models were "masculine" in nature, centering around traits of ambition, competence, intelligence, and achievement.

Furthermore, a significant number of women (314 or 83.3%) reported that gender is not an important characteristic of role models. Seventy six percent of the women reported that they could live without a role model of their own sex. However, 64% of these same women stated that they would like to have a female to talk with -- especially one to help them in their personal vs. professional career decisions.

## Discussion

The technique for determining women's role models differed in the present study from previous research. Instead of designating females as women's role models, the present study defined a role model as someone a woman conceptualizes and chooses. In comparison with previous research, the present study revealed that women's role model choices were more variable. Women did cite mothers, sisters, aunts, and female teachers as individuals they emulate. However, women also listed politicians, clergy, humanitarians, and actors as their role models. Furthermore, women predominantly selected men as their models and listed masculine personality characteristics as ones they emulated. This finding was especially true for women describing themselves during their college years.

These results should not be surprising, given the higher status of males in this culture in addition to their greater visibility in business, academia, and the media (Unger, 1979) where older women would be most likely to encounter these men. This latter explanation also accounts for the trend for women in the present study to have endorsed the "no one" role model category less when they described their college years than in previous years.

The finding that a significant number of women stated that gender is not a characteristic they seek in their role models is somewhat surprising, given the current emphasis on women finding another woman to be their role model. This finding does seem to support Hennig and Jardim's (1977) study of 25 top-level women executives. All women reported that they had had a mentor: a male boss. Furthermore, this result also supports Quinn's (Note 3) research. She found that females in the human service fields who had male mentors made a significantly greater number of positive statements about their mentor's influences on their integration of professional and personal roles. Finally, this result is supported by Moore and Sangaria's (1979) research in which less than half of the women administrators in Pennsylvania colleges and universities indicated that a mentor was important to them in their careers.

Recently, Paludi and Farylo (Note 4) have observed that college men reported that gender was not an important characteristic of their future models. The majority of male subjects

(74 of 118 sampled) stated that other qualifications were more important: advocate, guide, trust, support, finalize career goals. Furthermore, Paludi and Farylo's research indicated that developmental discontinuities were present in men's reports of their role models. The content of the role model category appeared to vary as a function of age while the category itself remained relatively stable. For example, men reported their role model category as "actor" -- a cast member from the Star Trek television show when they were younger; Paul Newman or Robert Redford, during their college years.

Directions for future research stemming from the present study are several. First, there is the need to obtain data on men and women's achievement striving and achievement goals. For example, are opposite-sex role models as effective as same-sex ones? Are female Ph.D.'s and M.D.'s who had a female role model (whom they perceived as a role model) more productive than those who had male role models? Similarly, are male professionals who had a female role model less productive than those who had a male role model? Second, is mentoring a mutually recognized reciprocal relationship? Future research needs to focus on the relationship from both the mentor's and mentee's perspective. Is the relationship close or one of distant admiration? Third, are females majoring or working in male-dominated fields more likely to seek female role models? Fourth, what impact does single-sex vs. co-ed colleges have on the mentoring relationship? Fifth, what does mentoring offer

to achievement? Is the role model a friend, guide, counselor, all three? Is the mentor different from an influential teacher? It is likely that several people influence the achievement behavior of women and men. It would be desirable to see the term role model or mentor be employed only when the individual conceptualizes this person as someone to be emulated. The technique for determining role models used in the present study can assist researchers in this goal.

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## Footnote

[1] Portions of this paper were presented at the Annual Meeting of the Midwestern Psychological Association, Chicago, May, 1983.

Table 1

Frequency of Women's Role Model Choice by Age Grouping

| Role Model Category | Childhood | Early Adolescence | Later Adolescence | Early Adulthood |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Female Relative | 23 | 21 | 18 | 16 |
| Female Instructor | 17 | 15 | 15 | 12 |
| Female Celebrity | 24 | 26 | 23 | 14 |
| Female Friend | 19 | 30 | 26 | 21 |
| Male Relative | 67 | 64 | 69 | 72 |
| Male Instructor | 53 | 51 | 54 | 64 |
| Male in Field of Study Desired by Subject | 42 | 52 | 55 | 61 |
| Male Friend | 36 | 38 | 43 | 45 |
| Feminine Personality Characteristics | 22 | 24 | 26 | 19 |
| Masculine Personality Characteristics | 44 | 40 | 45 | 51 |
| Column Totals[a] | 347 | 361 | 374 | 375 |
| $x^2$ | 71.81* | 61.79* | 80.69* | 128.62* |

*$p < .001$

[a]Column Totals do not add up to the total number of respondents (377) because of the fact that 8 Role Model Categories were eliminated from the analyses due to their being insufficiently endorsed.